

9 February 1987

# Get Off the Floor

✓ **ESSAY** William Safire

WASHINGTON

**T**he media used the occasion of Mr. Reagan's 76th birthday to clobber him.

He was portrayed as a doddering old man, out of touch and out of magic, lost in his anecdotage, being abandoned by his aides and deemed irrelevant by the opposition, his Administration in paralysis because he could not grasp the enormity of his breach of faith. All that was missing was the allegation that he walked the halls at night talking to the paintings.

Did he ask for this? You bet he did. When Mr. Reagan was riding higher in the polls than any second-term President, he treated the media with charming contempt: he spaced out news conferences to become quarterly events, forced National Security staff members who spoke to the press to submit to polygraph tests or be fired, encouraged his C.I.A. chief to threaten editors with jail for publishing embarrassments labeled secret, and falsely blamed reporters for the continuing captivity of hostages.

O.K., now we're even. Although nothing can stop coverage of the investigative story, the vicious circle can be broken by a public demonstration by the President that he understands and can cope with the problem.

He probably was sensible to wait until more facts emerged, and nothing he can do will completely "put it behind him," but for the President to continue to hunker down much longer is not a sign of strength or stubbornness, but a manifestation of fear. The reason his State of the Union drew such gleeful derision was that he choked up on the Iran issue.

To make a comeback, he must now undertake a speech and a news conference with a whole new attitude. No more of this it-was-only-one-plane-load amelioration; no more passive-construction "mistakes were made" by some ghostly system, followed by "I take full responsibility" spoken with body language that signals it was somebody else's fault.

Ronald Reagan, if he still has the right stuff, is required to stand up and show he knows the truth: that his head went for the reach-out-to-moderates strategic argument because his heart was in getting out the hostages; that he turned out to be a closet humanitarian to the detriment of the national interest and he won't make that mistake again.

Such an assertion is not like confessing to some terrible crime or abuse of power. The hostage families got to him; he let himself think the arms shipments were not ransom but tokens of good faith, and now he realizes he should have treated the ayatollahs the way he did the air controllers.

Saying this is not crawling; saying anything else is trying to live in a dream world. He can follow with a denunciation of the diversion of funds, which he stopped and made public the moment he learned of it, and then denounce those who are seeking to use this scandal as a way to cut off legal aid to the contras.

What's so bad about that posture? When angry reporters demand to know how he could have been such a hypocrite by talking tough and acting weakly, he can shake his head ruefully and say "Never let your heart rule your head in this job." As John Kennedy might have said, sometimes compassion asks too much. Having dealt with terrorism both ways, Mr. Reagan can say the bombing of Qaddafi proved which way was more effective.

Only with that subject dramatically dealt with can he even try to move on to the legacy he wants to leave his successor: a strong start on a nuclear shield that will make it impossible for the Russians to continue their offensive missile buildup.

In that regard, his untainted team of Weinberger and Shultz are working in surprising coordination at last.

## Reagan still can make a comeback

The Secretary of Defense has staked out a claim for a broad interpretation of the ABM treaty, to offset the Soviet narrow interpretation to restrict our testing of nuclear defense. The Secretary of State now will find a middle ground acceptable to Sam Nunn that will enable us to do just enough testing to keep the heat on the Russians to reduce their missile advantage.

That tough-cop-nice-cop approach suggests there is life in this Administration yet, if Mr. Reagan can breathe on the spark. He has some other assets: residual popularity and respect for the office are working for him. Moreover, investors here and in Japan are showing immense confidence in the U.S. economy, while no American forces are fighting anywhere.

Prosperity without inflation in the context of peace without surrender — that used to be a seemingly impossible dream. A President with the gumption to address today's topic A will earn the right to remind his countrymen, through their forgetful media, that those great goals were achieved on his watch. □